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Good Taste vs. Good Design: A Tug of War in the Light of Bling

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Abstract

Some products are considered to be ‘bad taste’ and therefore of less value. However, if we focus on what a product does with and for its users, rather than on what a product is, we can disregard superficial statements based on taste and instead reach a better understanding of design. This reasoning is based on the relationship between ‘good taste’ and ‘good design’, terms which are sometimes confused and treated as synonyms. In this article, we explore the tension between ‘good taste’ and ‘good design’ and how designers can use that tension in the design process. We consider ‘good taste’ to be rooted in a subjective context of inherent values, whereas ‘good design’ arises from competence and is based on professional skill. ‘Bad taste’ is here exemplified by products associated with the lifestyles of rap artists and the subculture of bling. In the context of a course on trends, industrial design students were given the task of exploring how bling products are perceived in everyday life and proposing future bling scenarios. Their views on bling were compatible with how bling is presented in the media. However, when the students began to consider what the product **does** rather than what it **is**, they were able to use bling as a source of creativity for their own bling projects. What other design opportunities are overlooked by regarding products as being in ‘bad taste’?

Prologue: Why bling?

'I love the word "bling". It can be loud, proud and sparkly, as well as cheap and tacky.' [1]

The quotation above comes from a blog about weddings, and describes a dress and its intended accessories that will make the bride feel like a diamond in a piece of jewellery. We believe that this statement summarises what characterises bling exceptionally well. Bling products are conspicuous and therefore impossible to ignore. Bling divides public opinion, either you like it or you don't. Bling generates strong feelings and opinions, something we experienced very vividly the first time we presented our thoughts on bling during a research seminar. The discussion that followed was, explosive to say the least. All the participants wanted to comment on it, and many felt an urge to accentuate their distaste for, and repudiation of, bling. For a moment, the audience forgot about political correctness. Instead they voiced comments in which prejudice and personal values were obvious. For example, bling users were claimed to be vulgar, uneducated, stupid, and unintelligent, representatives only of material and monetary values unconnected with what is good and morally correct.

During the rest of the seminar, the word 'bling' spread among the participants. 'Bling' could be heard both during coffee-break discussions and the presentations of other participants. We were not prepared for these reactions but we realised that we should investigate the phenomenon of bling more closely. What is it about bling and what makes it so emotionally charged? The dramatic reactions during this first seminar have functioned as our motivation for investigating what actually happened. Why is bling considered to be bad design among designers? The purpose of our theoretical and philosophical analysis of the relationship between bling, good design, and good taste is to illustrate how a product that represents an extreme taste can give insight into how people always react emotionally to design, and that this reaction is based on normative social values. So, what can bling teach us about design? One thing is certain: Bling makes people talk!

The struggle between good taste and good design

'Good' taste

In order to understand the struggle that takes place between bling as design expression and good/bad design, we want to begin by determining what is meant by 'good taste'. Brunius [2] claims that a person is regarded as exhibiting good taste if he or she is refined – in his or her dealings with other people, choice of clothes, choice of home environment, and opinions about art, etc. When a statement is made about aesthetic taste, it is per definition an evaluation. A person states that something is good or bad, or agreeable or disagreeable [2]. If a person in addition expresses significant experience as the reason for his or her opinions, this person is a competent judge of taste [2]. Consequently it is not appropriate to simply express an opinion relating to taste; one must also show that the thoughts behind that opinion are adequate to count as an expression of taste. Underlying this reasoning is Plato's thesis about the world of ideas: that thought is what counts and what preserves beauty, refinement, tastefulness.

According to Plato [2], beauty in objects implies partaking of the truly beautiful, i.e., the form or the idea of beauty. Consequently, what is supremely beautiful is also what is supremely good. Plato was critical of art, because it was either mimetic or reproductive. It depicts the world in a poor imitation of the world (of the senses), which in its turn is a reflection of a purer world (of ideas). Many centuries later we are still trapped in Plato's argument about beauty. People yearn for good taste, and see beauty as something elevated and divine. Though expressed differently today, people still adopt values indicating that ideas are more beautiful than actions. For instance, Norman [3] claims that products' beauty emanates from the user's *conscious reflection* and experience influenced by knowledge, learning, and culture. When it comes to design, it is often pointed out that a product must have content, not just appearance [4]. The product should be well worked-out from a holistic perspective, i.e., thoughts about the product are more crucial than its creation [5]. Merely imitating something that already exists gives the product less value than innovative aspects that demands reflection [4].

According to Kant [2], people experience beauty by way of their imaginations, e.g. free play. Kant differentiates between different kinds of beauty. Pure beauty can be found in ornaments and decorations, i.e., in the beauty of free play. Another kind of beauty is that which has a purpose, e.g., architecture. A third kind of beauty exists in the ideally beautiful, morality for instance. The beautiful can be equated with the true and proper. This can be compared to how Sandqvist [6] defends ugliness by arguing for the idea that what is ugly is alive. People are attracted to ugliness because it is alive and filled with delight. Ugliness escapes the demand for credibility (cf. preserved knowledge, [6]), and is allowed to express itself and play. Bad taste is more tolerant, 'mischievous', and provides more joy than good taste, which labours under the demands of maintaining the true, the divine [7]. Sandqvist [6] describes ugliness as the reason for beauty, not its antithesis or negation.

Hume is of the opinion that taste [2] can only be justified through joyful experiences, emotions, and desires. A product creates meaning for its user, irrespective of whether that meaning is intended by the designer or arises anyway [8]. It contributes to delight and thus to beauty, regardless of whether the arbiters of taste have branded the product as an example of good taste or not. Ahl and Olsson [9] claim that the arbiters of taste utilise guilt and shame; 'If you don't have enough cultural capital to know what is right, you still know that you don't know, and that you don't have this ability and should therefore be ashamed.' Furthermore, Ahl and Olsson [9] believe that good taste is equated with being a good person with a strong sense of morality. Such a person purchases products that have clean lines (with respect to form) and are environmentally friendly; he or she is not likely to lounge on a leather couch with a rustling bag of crisps watching the latest reality show on TV.

The sinful is ugly. According to Eco [10], the introduction of ugliness and suffering contributed to paying homage to the divine (the death of Jesus on the cross, who is illustrated as tormented and misshapen) and also encouraged other kinds of ugliness, as long as they were exaggerated for moral purposes alone, in order to strengthen piety. People flee their own mortality by shutting their eyes to what is sinful and ugly [6]. Perhaps that is why good judgement has been accorded such a prominent place in our culture, and contributes to making people hold on to what is good as they approach the tasteful or tasteless. The core values for taste have been passed down through so many generations that people view them as autonomous and react emotionally without the least reflection [11].

Bourdieu [12] discusses the link between culture and identity. By using taste a person can, according to Bourdieu, confer different class allocations on people in his or her surroundings and thus, at the same time, communicate affiliation with a group. When people wish to point out differences between 'us' and 'them' by expressing their taste, they use dualities such as authenticity, simplicity, individuality, and their opposites [13]. Our entire society is based on rivalries between us and them. Cornell [14] and Richins [15] describe consumption as an activity by which people use products as a way of relating to one another, of defining but also differentiating oneself from others. In this way people bestow a social identity on themselves through conscious choices of products [16, 17], in contradistinction to Bourdieu's argument about people being born into and fostered to their habitus.

'Good' design

Does 'good' design exist? Objects are considered to have status and value when identified as being 'designed'. In this way design is, according to Crozier [11], given meaning as a lifestyle, something aesthetically pleasing or fashionable. In Sweden, the Swedish Society for Industrial Design and Gregor Paulsson [18] struck a blow for more attractive everyday goods during the first half of the previous century. This happened at the same time as a transformation of the core values in society. Rampell [19] shocked the Swedish design collective with her hard criticism of good Scandinavian design. She is especially critical of the design award Excellent Swedish Design and as well as Ask [5] argues for the modernist values underlying good design. Rampell [19] primarily objects to Swedish design closing the door to postmodernism, which is portrayed as a threat. Rampell [19] claims that postmodern design is still judged on the basis of the modernist rules for good taste.

According to Ahl and Olsson [9], discussions of taste are avoided in design circles. Instead, designers pretend that the issue is quality, that through measurement some things become better than others for people. Furthermore, Ahl and Olsson [9] suggest that taste encompasses gender, power, and ethnicity. In spite of this, designers choose to call taste 'form' rather than 'taste'. As a result, good taste becomes synonymous with good form language [9]. An understanding of good form is based on values such as balance and symmetry [11]. Hume [2] believes that in an aesthetic context people often reach agreement about general issues, such as the value of elegance, vividness, and simplicity. On the other hand, people find it difficult to agree on details, for instance the exact point in time when the quality of elegance comes into existence. In order to be competent in one's aesthetic taste, one must, according to Hume, possess sensitivity, i.e., the freedom of imagination. However, a free and flowing imagination cannot function alone. Instead, it must be put in relation to personal interpretations, experiences, and professional skill.

In the world of aesthetic taste, a number of variations and mutually contradictory taste preferences prevail [2], for instance the gap between creative artists and practising critics [2]. Because of this, we feel that the issue of good design becomes a non-issue. Good design is promoted by design theorists and design historians as something that is needed to consolidate the ideas expressed about design. Thus Plato's thoughts about the world of ideas being more beautiful than the world of the senses return once more. For the practitioner who creates design, the idea of good design is meaningless because

good design can, according to Pye [20], only be measured in relation to the intentions of the designer. A bad product is, according to Pye [20], one that does not correspond to what the designer intended. From this we claim that good design is so thoroughly merged with professional proficiency and the skills that are necessary for creating something, that, if the practitioner were to assess something as being a good design or not, he or she would simultaneously assess him- or herself as being competent or not for the task at hand. For instance, Norman [3] writes that simply making something pretty, cute, or fun is not accepted among designers, who want to be acknowledged by their colleagues as being creative, imaginative, and deep. The criteria upheld by an arbiter of taste in order to determine what is good design are obvious and self-evident elements of professional skill, and thus superfluous for the practitioner.

Bling as a concept and how design students view it

What is bling?

*Bling bling
Everytime I come around yo city
Bling bling
Pinky ring worth about fifty
Bling bling
Everytime I buy a new ride
Bling bling
Lorinsers on Yokahama tires
Bling bling*

The lyrics above are from the rap song ‘Can see my earrings from a mile, bling bling’, which was written in 1999 by the seventeen-year-old rap artist B.G. (Baby Gangsta), from New Orleans. At the time, B.G. didn’t know he had just coined a term that would spread from the ghetto to the mainstream. ‘I just wish that I’d trademarked it’, B.G. is supposed to have said at a later date, ‘so I’d never have to work again’ [21]. Originally, ‘bling’ is an onomatopoeic slang term from Jamaica that imitates the ‘sound’ light makes when it hits and is reflected by a diamond [22, 23]. The term has been adopted by American rap artists and is usually used regarding glittering jewellery that indicates wealth: showy diamond rings, large golden necklaces and accessories. ‘Bling’ is also used to denote a lifestyle where it is important to signal wealth in a straight-forward manner through ostentatious consumption [24]. The diamonds represent the ultimate prize, the height of success, the glittering finale [25].



Figure 1 – ‘Bling’ is associated with, among other things, expensive and bombastic jewellery and watches [34].

In 2002 ‘bling’ was included in the *OED* with the following definition: ‘Ostentatious, flashy; designating flamboyant jewellery or dress. Also: that glorifies conspicuous consumption; materialistic’. ‘Bling’ is both a noun and an adjective and is thus not only associated with objects but also with their use. According to Duffy [25], ‘bling’ also represents values that allude to criminality, hardness, or violence. Apart from the American rap artists that popularised the term in the late 1990s, there are other influential subgroups that today lay claim to the term ‘bling’. What these groups have in common is fast ‘new’ money. One of these subgroups consists of wives of football professionals [26]. They are economically independent and surrounded by wannabes who, in their turn, spend large sums of money in order to appear bling, despite limited economic opportunities.

How do design students view bling?

The above descriptions of what bling is represent how bling is presented in the media, perhaps especially via the Internet [27], [28]. But how is bling experienced and defined in general, by ordinary people? And how does their image of bling correspond with that found in the media? In one study [29], design students discussed bling in relation to design and current trends. Design students are interested in aesthetics, and consequently, in aspects of good design and good taste. Therefore they represent what the design collective at large may believe about bling well. In the study it transpired that the students’ spontaneous interpretations of bling corresponded with how media presents bling [29]. The students described bling using words like ‘earrings’, ‘dollar signs’, ‘glitter’, ‘diamonds’, ‘jewellery’, ‘Pimp my Ride’, ‘hip-hop’, ‘rap’, ‘necklace’, ‘Versace’, ‘USA’, ‘rims’. People they associated with bling were, among others, rap

artists like Snoop Dog, P. Diddy, Jay-Z, Daddy Yankee, and Milad. However, they also mentioned people like J. Lo, Paris Hilton, and French President Sarkozy. In the students' discussions it became clear that they agreed that bling as a phenomenon is firmly rooted in an aesthetic culture that is distant from their own, and thus hardly something they were inspired by as a design expression. In addition, it was evident that they dissociated themselves from the design expression of bling. Different opinions were passionately defended; some students claimed that one product was bling while others considered the same product to be an example of luxury, glamour, or kitsch. In the end, the students expressed a common insight: bling was a challenge for them to handle due to the inherent emotional resistance they felt [29].

What does bling *do*?

A bling product shouts out its message: bigger is better, more is better, glitzier is better [30]. Bling products have a style that communicates their cost or positioning in a clear and obvious way, e.g. by an overly explicit exposure of trademarks or logotypes. But bling also reinforces prejudice. The following blog post is an indication of this: 'It is just part of the process of ghetto culture, becoming wealthy and indulging in whatever obvious and tasteless that puts their new-found wealth on display' [31].

According to Christoforidou and Olander [29], it was not until the design students began discussing what bling does with and to its users (for instance by representing pride), rather than what bling is, that they could accept bling as a source of inspiration. We believe that what bling does occur on two different levels, an individual and a social one. To the individual user, the contribution of bling is increased pride; it enhances the user's personal identity but also his or her group affiliation. A bling product becomes thus a status symbol - an attribute with which to signal the achieved level of success. Bling creates emotional reactions in the observer, who repudiates and dismisses it as superficial and tasteless, or the opposite occurs, and bling creates admiration and envy. On the social level bling represents the user's climb up the social ladder, from ghettos and poverty to wealth and success. Bling signals revolt, the breaking of social codes, and an active choice of placing oneself outside of convention and tradition. To the observer, however, bling confirms existing prejudices, consolidates power structures that segregate social groups, and reinforces the associations between 'black' rap culture on the one hand and violence and crime on the other. Bling challenges normative values that are deeply rooted in society, e.g., good judgement and the prevailing view of good taste.

Like so many other things people choose to consume, bling sends out signals that manifest life-style and group affiliation [24, 30]. Bling signals that the user has succeeded in achieving high economic status, and thus has climbed the social ladder [24]. At the same time, from the perspective of Bourdieu's [12] ideas about class affiliation, bling communicates low cultural capital. However, we believe that the users of bling do not experience an inferiority complex because they do not possess high cultural capital. Such complexes are assumed to exist by the others, those who possess 'good' taste, those who know, who dismiss bling and its users as tasteless. Bling is neither subtle nor sophisticated; a high degree of cultural refinement is not required in order to decipher a bling product. For this reason, we argue that the message can be understood by everybody, both initiates and outside observers. In this lies a difference,

in that those of independent economic means traditionally do not willingly let in outsiders. Making the codes available and overly explicit so that everyone can understand them is not as mystifying, exclusive, and excluding, and thus becomes vulgar instead.

Bling reflected in the contradiction between ‘good’ taste and ‘good’ design

Brunius’s [2] text on aesthetic taste contributes to clarifying why people in design circles are upset by the bling phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, bling has a quantitative aspect: more is better,. One diamond is not bling, but an excessive number of diamonds in infinite repetition on a ring is. Brunius [2] writes that the enemy of beauty is the boredom caused by repetition. Does the multitude of diamonds neutralise the experience of the diamond’s beauty? Both Ask [5] and Rampell [19] believe that the prevailing view of good design is based on modernist criteria when evaluating products attributed to postmodernism. For this reason, such products appear to threaten good design. On the basis of this assumption we find it reasonable to consider bling as a postmodern phenomenon, and thus, from a modernist perspective, a threat to good taste. Perhaps that is why bling upsets so many people to such extent.

One additional demand that Hume [2] places on an arbiter of taste is freedom from prejudice. By showing good judgement it is possible to avoid prejudice. Good judgement is an important prerequisite for good taste. This requirement is extremely interesting when viewed in relation to the bling phenomenon because the evaluation of bling is strongly connected to the evaluation of African-American culture in the USA. Are the arbiters of taste capable of seeing beyond the prejudice associated with bling, seeing bling for what it is, and seeing through that which is first visible: a black rap artist from the ghetto who believes he is someone, a person who, without arguing for his own opinion or indicating some underlying conscious thought, shows himself off instead of being discreet and refined? The fact that bling is so provocative to the aesthetic elite of the Western world is probably due to the lack of an expectation of finding refined thought behind it, that it is a superficial exposure of status linked to appearance without any connection to Plato’s world of ideas.

What can we learn from the tension that bling produces?

According to Sandqvist [6], things that liberate us and set us free are beautiful. Bling liberates us from conventions and opens us up for creativity and a zest for life. Bling appeals to our emotions to a greater extent than does our reason. Bling has shown that good taste and good design are not synonymous. Good taste is premised on a subjective evaluation that is deeply rooted in inherited core values. Good design on the other hand, is a result of competence and professional skill. The way in which people measure or determine what is good design is only important to the critic, not to the practitioner. According to Swann [32], designers have always traditionally intended for their design solutions to contribute to what is positive and good for society. Not until the advent of postmodern philosophy did designers permit themselves to challenge what was considered good for the user [32]. In spite the fact that we today live in a postmodern society, the core values for good taste and good design lag behind and stubbornly keep

us confined in the norms of modernism. Bling as a phenomenon fits much better into the postmodern paradigm. Perhaps that is why the arbiters of taste and the design collective dislike bling so much. Whatever the case may be, bling serves as an excellent mirror with which to reflect and make visible discrepancies and blind spots in our aesthetic behaviour.

Our experiences in discussing bling in an academic context confirm ethnologist Eva Londos's statement [9] that discussions of taste often trigger subconscious values. Design researchers with whom we discussed this issue, for instance at the research seminar where it all began, brought to our attention the strength of the influence of the norms and values of the arbiters of taste on how we react emotionally to products. After all, political correctness was forgotten for a moment. Discussions on bling raise questions and elicit discomfort; they lead to debate and defence of the participants' own lifestyles [33]. Individuals feel ill at ease when they are in environments and contexts where their own values and lifestyles are questioned [35].

Taste is dangerous because it is a matter of moral, write Ahl and Olsson [9]; who is a good or a bad person, who is educated or uneducated, how a person should or should not be. Our experiences from bling discussions with both students and design researchers confirm Ahl's and Olsson's argument regarding morality, or rather a moment of lost morality. Designers could become better at utilizing people's aesthetic morality for something creative, regardless of whether the issue is bling or other phenomena that fall within the scope of conventions of taste.

Perhaps the design process can be used for testing ideas or design concepts in contrast to the cultures of taste that prevail in an ongoing design assignment? This could be done in order to understand how trends are created or to provide provocation in opposition to prevailing trends and values. Furthermore, on the level of design practice it is important to be able to see beyond what bling *is*, and to instead look at what a bling product *does* with and for its users. In such circumstances, bling may very well be an example of good design. Perhaps this is valid also for other product areas that feel aesthetically distant to the designer. If the designer refrains from looking at what the intended product is, and instead looks at what the product does, his or her creativity can be stimulated. Regardless, there is a multitude of products and situations that would make their users feel better were those products and situations capable of doing for them what bling does for its users, i.e., increase pride and coolness, enhance self-image, group affiliation, etc. Consider how boring most disability aids and some ecological products are compared to bling products. Whether bling can ever be considered being good taste is another issue, however.

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